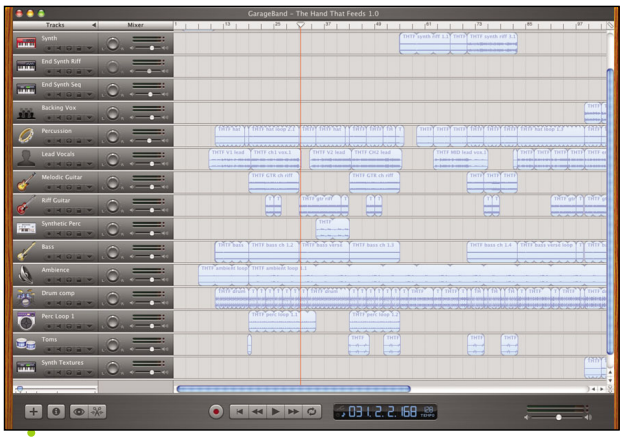
Apple Computer GarageBand 2.0.1



GarageBand 2.0.1
$79
Apple Computer
www.apple.com/ilife

Is there a musician in you that is struggling to get out? GarageBand 2 can set you free. The program is multitrack recording software that's included as part of Apple's iLife '05 suite, along with an assortment of other digital media applications.

When I reviewed GarageBand 1 for June 2004's *CPU* (page 77), a main drawback of the software then was that it didn't use standard musical notation. Version 2 overcomes that problem, adding the familiar musical staff to the program, with notes appearing onscreen as you play. In addition, you can easily tweak your song by dragging the notes around the ledger lines. You still can't print your score, however, which is a curious omission. If you can't read music and don't want to learn, you still have access to an intuitive graphic view, which displays notes as bars on a graph.

Also new to GarageBand is the ability to record up to eight tracks at the same time. (Version 1 could only handle one track at a time.) For example, a band using MIDI instruments could create a live digital recording with GarageBand, or a single person could play guitar and sing simultaneously. Whether you're playing alone or not, external USB or MIDI instruments are virtually a necessity. They're the only way to create decent music in a reasonable amount of time. Without these, you can use the Mac keyboard as a piano, but this just doesn't cut it for making music.

If you don't play or sing your music perfectly while recording, don't worry. A new Enhance Tuning feature can bring out-of-tune tracks into tune. This is primarily useful for vocals, and it does a fine job of fixing off-key notes.

The program also has hundreds of ready-made loops (short, repeatable music bites) available to add bass lines, drum beats, and other pizzazz to your music. A clever loop selection tool lets you hone the choices. For example, select the Electronic and Dark buttons, and you'll see and hear matching loops. The ability to create your own loops has also been added in version 2.

With an external instrument in the hands of a capable musician, GarageBand's end result can be extraordinary. The sound quality and reproduction of natural instrument sounds are excellent. Perhaps the best review of the program is to hear yourself what GarageBand is capable of. Macjams.com offers innumerable downloadable songs that GarageBand aficionados have created. Many creations are impressive testaments to the app's capabilities. GarageBand sounds so great that in many cases you'd guess the music was professionally produced by more powerful and expensive software.

GarageBand requires a DVD drive and a G4 or faster Mac. I tested the program with a cheap USB music keyboard connected to a 1GHz G4, which is along the lower end of what the program supports. After creating only a few tracks, the interface became a little sluggish. The new Track Lock feature does let you create an audio file from selected tracks, rather than rendering them on the fly, which lightened the load on my Mac's processor. Later, I could unlock those tracks to make further changes.

Version 2 lets you import MIDI, Apple Lossless, and Sony ACID files into your songs, but the program still doesn't let you export to MIDI files. That's one of several excluded features (along with the inability to print scores) that could keep GarageBand from being a serious musician's tool.

You can export your creations to iTunes and use them as audio tracks in DVDs you burn with iDVD. iTunes and iDVD are included in the iLife suite. You can also expand GarageBand's sound set with Jam Pack add-ons ($99 each), which add new instruments, such as electronica remix sounds and symphony orchestra instruments, to the program's repertoire.

Although it's not perfect, GarageBand 2 is an excellent introduction to multitrack recording. It's easy to learn and use, but it's powerful enough that hobbyists won't outgrow it quickly. Considering the other software in the iLife suite, including a movie editor and DVD-authoring tools, $79 is a bargain. The program is a novel way to make beautiful music. ▲

by Kevin Savetz

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CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect